

The American Comedy Archives Interview

DON KNOTTS

Interviewed March 9, 2005

By Bill Dana and Jenni Matz

In Los Angeles, CA

Biographical Information:

Born Jesse Donald Knotts, July 21, 1924 in Morgantown, WV. Died February 24, 2006.

He served in World War II as an entertainer and received the World War II Victory Medal.

Don Knotts graduated from West Virginia University in 1948 with a degree in theater. After being a regular performer in the soap opera *Search for Tomorrow* from 1953 to 1955, he gained additional exposure in 1956 on Steve Allen's variety show. He is remembered for appearing in Allen's mock "Man in the Street" interviews, always as a man obviously very nervous about being on camera. This fidgety, high-strung characterization would serve him well throughout his career.

Knotts is best known for his role as deputy Barney Fife on the American television sitcom *The Andy Griffith Show*, a portrayal that earned him five Emmy Awards. After leaving the series in 1965, Knotts starred in a series of film comedies: *The Incredible Mr. Limpet* (1964), *The Ghost and Mr. Chicken* (1966), *The Reluctant Astronaut* (1967), *The Shakiest Gun in the West* (1968) and *The Love God?* (1969).

In the 1970s, Knotts and Tim Conway starred together in a series of slapstick movies. Particularly, in the 1975 feature film for Disney, *The Apple Dumpling Gang*, and its 1979 sequel

Knotts returned to series television in the late 1970s, appearing as landlord Ralph Furley on *Three's Company* starring John Ritter, after Audra Lindley and Norman Fell left the show to star in a short-lived spinoff series ("The Ropers"). Knotts remained on the show from 1979, until it ended in 1984. In 1989, Knotts was given a recurring role as pesky neighbor Les Calhoun on *Matlock*, which starred his old friend and star Andy Griffith. A role he enjoyed until 1992. He also appeared with Griffith in the 1986 made-for-television movie *Return to Mayberry*, where he once again of course played good old "Barney Fife".

In 1998, Knotts began a recent career comeback with his part as the mysterious TV repairman in *Pleasantville* (1998). and as the voice of Mayor Turkey Lurkey in Disney's big film *Chicken Little* in 2005 (his first Disney movie since 1979). He has appeared as a guest star on numerous sitcoms since.

NOTE:

The following is an Excerpt from our interview with Mr. Knotts.

To read the full transcript, please contact the archivist
Jennifer_Matz@emerson.edu

BILL DANA: We know you were a ventriloquist, but how did that happen? That happened in Morgantown, right? Before you went?

DON KNOTTS: Well, I started that when I was about 13 years old. I sent away for a *ventrilo*, it said in the back of the magazine. "10 cents, put it in your mouth and throw your voice", but when I got it, it turned out to be just a bird caller, but it did have a little pamphlet explaining how ventriloquism was done in terms of creating the illusion. So I got a hold of a dummy and learned now to do it.

DANA: And what did you name your dummy?

KNOTTS: Danny.

DANA: Danny?

KNOTTS: Just Danny.

DANA: Danny the dummy.

JENNI MATZ: So Mr. Knotts, in your book, Barney Fife and Other Characters I've Known, you wrote that even though you were practicing ventriloquism, you always yearned to be a comedian. You envied the comics.

KNOTTS: That's right. I always wanted to be a comedian. Actually, I wanted to be a comedy actor, is what I really wanted to be. But I had great -- I loved people like **Jack**

Benny. Jack Benny was my idol. I finally got to work with him on the show, and that was really a thrill for me.

MATZ: There was a great story in your book about when you first saw Jack Benny, you were stationed in New Guinea during the war and the story was great. You said that just seeing his face --

KNOTTTS: Yeah, it thrilled me. I couldn't get over it. In fact I saw him sitting in a jeep outside, back of the stage. This was in New Guinea, it was raining and everything, and I just couldn't believe it, seeing him sitting there.

MATZ: One of the questions we're talking about is origins and power of laughter, and in your life personally do you recall the first time that something really made you laugh?

KNOTTTS: No, I don't recall that, but I do recall laughing a lot in my childhood because we had a funny family (laughter) my brother, Shadow was a very funny guy, and everybody in the family loved to laugh, and of course it was during the Depression, we were very poor, and there wasn't much to laugh about. I guess that's why we were laughing. But I just grew up laughing, and my mother loved comedy, she loved to laugh, and it became a part of me.

DANA: The -- actual *survival humor* starts real early. Another commonality we have, being a Depression baby, the

options to laughter were pretty brutal.

KNOTTTS: That's right (laughter).

MATZ: ... I'd love you to talk about that more, about all of the obstacles and the closed doors that you had to face. When you first went to New York you had a lot of rejection, but you kept trying.

KNOTTTS: Well you do, you get a lot of rejection of course. Just finding your way around all the agents and all the casting offices, 'course in those days it was a little different, it was a little easier I think -- television was just sort of getting started. It hadn't really -- there was no network. It was all local then, and after a lot of rejection and a lot of this and that, I wound up on a radio show. A show called **Bobby Benson the B Bar B**, and it turned out to be a sort of a steady job for me. Didn't pay a whole lot, but it was steady. I did that for about five seasons, for the Mutual Network.

DANA: What was the character voice that you did?

KNOTTTS: His name was **Windy Wales** and he was {doing old character voice} an old man who talked like this. I did that for all these years. People thought I was just an old man.

MATZ: It was actually that character that Andy Griffith

remembered right? When you first met him? Can you talk about that?

KNOTTTS: That's right. Well I got in the cast of **No Time for Sergeants**, which Andy starred in, during the first days of rehearsal, one day we took a break, I went outside and Andy of all things was whittling a piece of wood, and he looked at me and he said "excuse me, aren't you Windy Wales?" Do you do that part? I said yeah. I was amazed that he recognized my voice.

MATZ: It struck me that throughout your career you've had a lot of very serendipitous occurrences that led you to roles like running into Andy a couple times, edged you along your career. You wrote about a time when a friend of yours told you about the audition for No Time for Sergeants -

KNOTTTS: Oh yeah, that was - there was a guy named **Frank Behrens** was my friend, and I was really down on my luck at this point. The radio show was off the air, had gone off the air, and so I was really afraid I was going to have to get out of the business and get a job doing something else, and I walked in through there, this little drug store at NBC, the RCA building where all the actors hung out, and my friend Frank Behrens was sitting there and he said "how come you're not down there trying to get a job on this new show that's coming on Broadway? **No Time for Sergeants**."

They're looking for Southern people. You should be just right." And I hadn't heard about it for some reason, so I jumped on the subway and I guess the office— **Morris Evans** was producing it, and his office was down in Greenwich Village, so I jumped on the subway and I went, and when I got there, the receptionist told me I was too late, he said they've stopped seeing people. It's 5:00 and he just won't see any more people. So I walked out, I was about to get back in the subway and I heard my name being called. Turned around, it was this receptionist telling me to come back. He said you looked so crestfallen, I talked him into seeing you. So I went in, and he says all right, report to the Allen theatre, Monday morning for a reading. And that's how I got into the play. And fortunately, I was very fortunate because that time I met Andy Griffith.

MATZ: Do you think luck had a lot to do with your early career?

KNOTTTS: I think luck always has a lot to do with it.

Persistence too, but you have to have a little luck along the way.

KNOTTTS: I came into audition for the ***Tonight Show***, and lo and behold, you were the guy doing the auditions.

DANA: But before that we had met on the street, and you had

told me you were going back to Morgantown. You had done the novice tranquilizer salesman for the whole cast. And I remember that, and you'd do that for Steve Allen.

KNOTTTS: Yeah, I auditioned it for you, really. And I remember you said do you want to go on *Tonight*? And I said yeah, I guess so, but I said "my suit's in the cleaners can we make it another night?" but I remember I was lying. But I went on that.

DANA: This is one of those genuine, and the rest is history. I still remember Billy Harback's laugh when you did -- give us just a touch of that so they'll know what that character was that was selling the tranquilizer.

KNOTTTS: He was always nervous. I'm trying to think of some of the titles. {does the famous nervous man character, shaking with faltered voice} *My name is KB Morrison.* What's the KB stand for? *Kaboom!* (laughter). Oh no- it's-- *My name is KB Morrison and I used to work at a dynamite factory.* *What's the KB stand for? Kaboom!* Yeah, that was it.

MATZ: Are you nervous?

KNOTTTS: No!

MATZ: Can you talk about the birth of Nervous Man? You wrote about it in your book a little bit, but it would be interesting, I think, for students to understand how you cultivate a character.

KNOTTTS: Well, I'm a big fan of humorist -- I forget his name
now --

DANA: Are you talking about the guy who did the malaprops?
The radio announcer of the football game?

KNOTTTS: No, no.

DANA: Benchley?

KNOTTTS: Bob Benchley, **Robert Benchley**. I was a big fan of
his, so I forgot his name. And he had sort of a way of
doing this, a sort of apologetic way -- he'd sort of do
this kind of thing and I was a big fan and I thought about
that, and I thought about him a lot. And then one night I
had a dream, I dreamed about this nervous guy shaking, and
I put the shaking guy with Benchley's character so it
blended the two, and that's how I came up with the
character. I wrote the first routine, I wrote it in about
an hour. The whole thing just came to me out of the dream.

KNOTTTS: Well, the **Steve Allen show** came out to the west coast
from New York, for the last season, and it was during that
last season that we knew that we were going off the air,
and I didn't have a job, and I found out -- I saw a pilot
of the **Andy Griffith show**, and I thought jeez, he could use
a deputy, he doesn't have a deputy. So I called Andy who

was in New York at the time, and suggested he have a deputy sheriff. And Andy said "that's a hell of an idea, let me call Sheldon Leonard, he's going to be the executive producer, and maybe you can meet with him, see what happens". So I did, I met with Sheldon, and wound up getting the part of the deputy sheriff. I think it was just the weren't quite sure they were going to use me as a regular. All the time, every show, as I remember they only gave me a one-year contract, but after I had been on the show about a month or so, for four shows, they signed me for five years (laughs) if we went on five years. So that's how I just went right from the end of the *Steve Allen show*, right into the Griffith operation and started about two months later.

MATZ: What do you think prepared you for doing these kind of roles, and these kind of comic characters. I mean, you didn't go to an acting school or a comedy school. Was it just by doing?

KNOTTS: I think it is by doing. And as I said earlier, I think just growing up in this funny family where people are always—somebody was making you laugh or trying to make you laugh all the time, and I think that's a way to develop. I developed probably a sense of timing or something as a kid, it just became second nature, and I think I was sort of

prepared before I even got into the business, in a way.
You know what I mean, it's hard to explain, but it started
to become natural, is what I'm trying to say.

MATZ: I'm curious, Mr. Knotts, since you really began in the
very beginning of television. You were one of the early
pioneers of the medium. And in 50 years you've spanned a
lot of different roles and been on a lot of different --
you know, you've been in films, you've done variety shows,
you've been on sitcoms, soap operas. Has *what is funny*
changed that you can tell over the years?

KNOTTS: Well, I would think basic humor never changes much.
But I think what people think is funny has changed a little
bit with the times. But I think basically humor doesn't
change much.

MATZ: There's something that comes across that strikes me in
watching a lot of your performances recently. With one
exception, that all of your characters, even Ralph Furley,
who was a kind of a sleaze ball (laughter), it projected a
niceness. Um, and one of your comic heroes, Jack Benny,
said that to be a good comedian, you've got to draw the
audience in and make them like you. Do you think that's

true?

KNOTTS: Well... yeah. I think so. I think that is true.

There are some comics, some actors who -- use the word comic -- who don't try that and they, they do well otherwise. But I've found -- I think that's important. I... I thought it was important to me. And maybe it was because Jack Benny was my idol.

MATZ: But to you, comedy... it's, uh... the lighter side of life.

KNOTTS: Right.

MATZ: An outlet and a, a venting for that, right?

KNOTTS: Absolutely.

MATZ: well, I say "with one exception" because the role in *Pleasantville* was very different, and it was -- I think it was a great role --

DANA: Yeah, it was.

MATZ: -- because everyone was surprised to see you as not such a, a friendly guy.

KNOTTS: Yeah. I had a little difficulty doing that one, by the way. I mean, it was hard for me to do that. In fact, he wanted me to go even further than I did. The director did.

MATZ: Yeah. It was interesting. We are talking about teachable tools, that, you know, Bill was saying that you

need to start off with -- what was your term? A blade? Or
--

DANA: The idea is that...you, you can't become funny. Uh...
I mean that... I've always thought, and I use the, the
analogy that if you don't have a blade and there's nothing
to sharpen --

KNOTTTS: That's right.

DANA: You can become a comedian, or better funny person, but
you can't just become funny unless God has said, "Hey.
You're funny."

KNOTTTS: And it has come from inside. Uh... it touches, though
on something that we talked about earlier, uh... about
knowing when something's funny. I think one of the
greatest things about **Jack Benny** was that Jack Benny knew
deep down -- and he knew when something was funny and when
it wasn't. They said he was a great editor. A great --
all the material he'd go through, he'd could pick out those
that he'd thought would work because it made him laugh. So
I think you have to have that sense of humor in... yourself
to say, yes, that's funny. That makes me laugh, and
that'll make people laugh. I think that's, that's
important to... in doing comedy. That's the blade you're
talking about, I believe.

MATZ: Do you think the world needs more comedians?

KNOTTS: Well, we could always use more good comedians. I don't know about more comedians, but more good ones, yes. You always need more. You always need more laughs.

MATZ: Is there any advice or... encouragement you could give to young people who may be watching this about following their, their early dreams and persevering even if it can be very hard.

KNOTTS: Well, you do have to, you do have to -- persevere is the right word. Because... you can't take your eyes off your goal. You just have to keep after it. That's, that's certainly one thing I, I, I never lost sight of the goal. I just couldn't. I just... it was just something I had to do ever since I can remember. Ah... I just had my eyes on it all the time. And, uh... you just... once you set your sights, you can't, you can't leave it. Uh... whatever happens. Now there'll be some bad luck along the way and some, but some good luck will come along. As long as you keep your sights on your goal. It's tough, sometimes. But that's what you have to do.

DANA: It's redundant, then, to say we've, we've been asking the question, "Was it worth it?"

KNOTTS: Of course it was worth it (laughter). I had a great time. Didn't you?

End of Interview Excerpt: Don Knotts